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CORN BELT IRRIGATION PAYS OFF

ANNCR:

VOA AGRICULTURE SPECIALIST ROD TURNBULL HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM KANSAS CITY ON THE IMPACT OF INCREASED IRRIGATION ON FARM PRODUCTION IN AMERICA'S CORN (MAIZE) BELT.

VOICE:

SOME AREAS IN THE UNITED STATES ARE IRRIGATED WITH WATER PUMPED FROM RIVERS. AND SOME ARE IRRIGATED FROM RESERVOIRS. WHICH STORE UP IMMENSE QUANTITIES OF WATER WHICH ARE CHanneLED TO FARM LAND THROUGH IRRIGATION DITCHES. IN STILL OTHER AREAS WELLS ARE DRILLED FROM WHICH WATER MAY BE PUMPED TO NEARBY FIELDS.

IN TERMS OF THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF LAND FARMED IN THE UNITED STATES, THE AMOUNT OF IRRIGATED LAND IS RELATIVELY SMALL. IN A LARGE PART OF THE MIDDLE WEST KNOWN AS THE "CORN BELT", THE MOISTURE SUPPLY GENERALLY IS ADEQUATE OR NEARLY ADEQUATE TO PRODUCE GOOD CROPS EVERY YEAR. BUT IN PARTS OF THE CORN BELT, WHAT'S FREQUENTLY NEEDED IS JUST ONE MORE RAIN AT THE PROPER TIME IN THE SUMMER TO PROVIDE MAXIMUM YIELDS.

THE STATE OF MISSOURI, WHICH LIES IN THE CORN BELT IS A MAJOR PRODUCER OF CORN AND SOYBEANS. THE MISSOURI FARMER NORMALLY EXPECTS TO HAVE TO TURN THE IRRIGATION PUMPS ON AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR. AND MANY OF THEM HAVE PROVIDED FOR THIS BY BUILDING WHAT ARE CALLED BIG PONDS, BY DAMMING UP A DITCH OR RAVINE THAT DRAINS THE FIELD. THE WATER EITHER IS PUMPED FROM THE POND OR IS SIPHONED, IF THE LAY OF THE LAND IS JUST RIGHT.

THIS METHOD OF IRRIGATION IS RATHER EXPENSIVE, AND IS LIMITED IN THE AMOUNT OF WATER IT WILL SUPPLY. IN TWO COUNTRIES IN MISSOURI WHERE THIS METHOD HAS BEEN TRIED FOR SOME TIME ON SEVERAL FARMS, CAREFUL COSTS AND PRODUCTION RECORDS HAVE BEEN KEPT SINCE NINETEEN SEVENTY-TWO. THE RECORDS SHOW THAT IRRIGATION AT THE RIGHT TIME DOUBLED CORN YIELDS AND INCREASED SOYBEAN YIELDS IN MANY CASES BY FIFTY PERCENT.

THE INTERESTING THING IS THAT ONLY FROM FIVE TO TEN CENTIMETERS OF WATER WAS APPLIED EACH YEAR. BUT IT WAS APPLIED JUST WHEN THE CROP WAS IN THE NEED OF IT OR BEGINNING TO SUFFER. RECORDS ON THESE FIELDS LAST YEAR SHOWED THAT THE IRRIGATED FIELDS RETURNED TWO HUNDRED AND TWO DOLLARS MORE PER HECTARE ABOVE COSTS THAN DID NON-IRRIGATED.

SOIL CONTRACTORS -- THE MEN WHO BUILD THE PONDS WITH HUGE EARTH-MOVING MACHINES -- ALREADY HAVE MORE BUSINESS SCHEDULED THAN THEY CAN HANDLE, WHICH INDICATES HOW FAVORABLY FARMERS ARE LOOKING ON THIS TYPE OF IRRIGATION. A CROP SPECIALIST AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI BELIEVES THAT THESE EXTRA EFFORTS TOWARD IRRIGATION MAY BE THE NEXT BREAKTHROUGH IN MISSOURI TOWARD GREATER PRODUCTION THAT WILL BE DEMANDED IN THE YEARS TO COME BY THE INCREASES IN POPULATION THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

JS/RCS